

Sarah Lucas at the Hammer Museum

June 9–September 1, 2019

If you're going to depict a woman bending over a toilet with a cigarette stuck up her anus, you should have a good reason. Unfortunately, a compelling motivation, aside from a loosely articulated impatience with gender discrimination, does not fully reveal itself in Sarah Lucas' retrospective, *Au Naturel*, now on view at the Hammer Museum by way of the New Museum. Still, visitors excited to see the work of this grunge-era bad girl will encounter seven plaster casts of women's cigarette-embedded bodies, naked from the waist down, some splayed on a table (*Michele*, 2015), while others faint across refrigerators (*Margot*, 2015).

Lucas, who is associated with the Young British Artists (YBAs), became famous in the 1990s for works like *Eating a Banana* (1990) (a black and white photo of the artist moodily fruit munching) and *Get Hold of This* (1994) (two green rubber arms positioned in an obscene *faggoussa* gesture). In the 1990s, this female defiance went a long way in espousing Lucas' disruptive brand of feminism, but today, it feels thin in its lack of a more specific critique.

Perhaps the most telling product of Lucas' oeuvre is the title work, *Au Naturel* (1994): a slumped mattress littered with objects symbolizing female (two melons and a pail) and male (a cucumber and two oranges) anatomy. Unlike

Tracey Emin's coterminous *My Bed* (1998) (unmade, and littered with vodka bottles), *Au Naturel* doesn't evoke deep feeling. The presence of a gritty bare mattress on the floor does convey a sense of emotional poverty, but its straightforward allusion to body parts lacks the emotional depth of Emin's scorching document of loneliness.

Lucas' work helps us understand how certain artistic gestures once loosened an ossified social structure without necessarily offering a way forward. In the 1980s and '90s, Emin harnessed pathos to describe women's conditions, and Adrian Piper revealed in raced and sexed confrontations in ways that still shed light on the current moment. For her part, Lucas didn't muck around explicitly with the agonies of racism, rape, or the denial of reproductive freedoms. Rather, in her smoggy *Smoking* (1998), we see Lucas staring calmly at a ceiling while blowing smoke from her mouth, and in *Self-Portrait #1, #3, and #5* (all 1993), she faces the viewer with wide-legged, IDGAF charisma. In the '90s, her ability to unneurotically take up space was thrilling, but in the new millennium, the long-standing problems of white supremacy, class warfare, and sexual trauma make such efforts seem incomplete.

Lucas' work raises the question of what we should expect of female artists who delve into themes of gender within their work—can't they just wittily observe and disseminate? Lucas seems to argue for such a position with her refusal to lose control. And, in her use of humor and exhaustion, she does allow for a calmer conversation about politics than, say, Piper,

who (brilliantly!) handed out cards to people that explained that she was rendered uncomfortable by their racist remarks. In the 1990s, Lucas' refusal to agonize may have made viewers feel less accused by her work, allowing them to consume it without shutting down defensively. In this way, perhaps Lucas' art belongs more in the company of Andrea Fraser's bananas *Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk* (1989), which wrapped up gender critique in wisecracks.

The meaning of Lucas' work dries up a lot faster than Fraser's, however, because it doesn't speak to the larger scope of human existence. Simply put, intersectional feminism's emphasis on the connection between sex, class, race, sexuality, and disability, has taught us that we can't just talk about gender anymore. Lucas makes herself the dominant subject of her photographs and installations, which also allows her to sidestep the calls to actions of her peers. Meanwhile, Fraser followed up *Museum Highlights* with installations like *Down the River* (2016), which filled the Whitney Museum with the ambient sounds of correctional facilities, thus bringing race into her circle of care.

In works such as *Self-Portrait With Fried Eggs* (1996) (Lucas looking blasé while wearing eggs on her breasts), Lucas is confrontational but noncommittal towards any specific cause or sentiment, and so she remains hip without becoming shrieky and embarrassing. Yet today's mix of cultural horrors—prevalent racism, classism, and sexism—don't leave much room for skirting the issues.

It is unfair to judge work made in the 1990s according

to the cultural standards of today, yet this retrospective, shown in two major cities this year, brings renewed attention to Lucas and the gender politic that she espoused, and begs the question, why now? In the '90s, Lucas' self-possessed, gentle jokes were groundbreaking and new, and her disruptive punk rock attitude felt thrilling in the face of overly sexed depictions of women in art and culture, but c. 2019, we desperately need feminist artists who admit that we're in trouble. And that's what we require this minute, a show in a powerful venue like the Hammer, which can devote money and space to work that expresses this time of anguish. In its straightforward way, Lucas' work keeps its shit together, but what we need now is honest, raw art that feels unfettered and ready to fight—a more apt depiction of the dangerous and chaotic times that we live in.

George Herms and Terence Koh at Morán Morán

June 1–July 6, 2019

The pairing of Herms and Koh may feel like an odd one at first: Herms, the bohemian elder statesman of assemblage, who has been consistently experimenting in his signature mode for the past 60 years, and Koh, the fashionable, shape-shifting bad boy who got his start making zines under the moniker “asianpunkboy” before becoming a rapidly rising art star with a penchant for performative spectacle. Billed as a two-person exhibition, a recent show at Morán Morán featuring the two artists in fact offered something much

broader. The exhibition was an homage, a collaboration, and a look at the personal connection between artists of two generations. Yet, more suspect, the exhibition also felt like a cribbing of the older artist's work by the younger, illustrating what can happen when reverential homage slouches towards undistinguished appropriation.

The first room in the gallery set up a respectful hierarchy, honoring Herms as a godfather of West Coast assemblage art. A dozen or so modestly-sized sculptures by Herms were displayed across an L-shaped plinth, from simple abstract compositions of wood and metal to more complex juxtapositions of once-purposeful objects. Since the mid-1950s, Herms has been trafficking in his own brand of Beat-inflected assemblage, piecing together found and discarded objects into constructions that are more than the sum of their parts. “I turn shit into gold,” he remarked in 2013.¹

Herms' works in the Morán Morán show were dated from 1983 to 2013, but they all had the worn, sepia-toned patina of neglect and disuse. Assembled from chunks of wood, tin cans, pine cones, light bulbs, rusted metal, and more contemporary—but still dated—detritus like CDs and an old flip phone, Herms' abstract fabrications were all form, material, and whimsy. Like junk shop Calders. In *Nose Cone Rose* (2005), a pine cone hung off the end of a metal rod, part of some disassembled machine, elegantly balanced by a curving piece of wood. Onto this, Herms stamped “LOVE,” a phrase repeated on several other works. More exuberant

than Joseph Cornell's discreet boxes, Herms' seemingly slapdash arrangements beg a similar kind of poetic free association in the viewer. In *Therapeutic Rose* (2001), a paint can supported the slipcase for the three book set, *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud*, itself topped by a suggestive firework canister. The elegiac *For Dizzy* (1993) was a metal hoop holding a feather, a scrap of red velvet, and the *L.A. Times* obit for jazz legend Dizzy Gillespie. The pleasure in these works came not just from what Herms has assembled, but how he put it all together. Each work set up a tension between its components' previous lives and the new formal and narrative context Herms has established. Economy never looked so rich.

In the second gallery, Koh drew on Herms' large archive of found materials to create his own installation, simply titled *boats* (2019). Using “assemblage materials relinquished by George Herms,”² Koh created an armada of boats laid out on the floor in a triangular formation, all headed towards a sculpture at the far end of the room. Herms' familiar pie tins, books, and medical apparatuses, along with weathered wood and metal, were fashioned into little boat-like assemblages. Each held a candle or small plant, which stood in for the ships' masts in several instances: a flip-flop sported a paper sail, a speaker was tethered to a black light bulb, twin IV bags trailed long tubes in their wake. The overall effect made the simple efficacy of Herms' sculptures that much more impressive by comparison. Pressed into service as one big illustrative metaphor, Koh's boats had little of the charm

1. Fan Zhong, “George Herms Re-Emerges,” *W Magazine*, September 13, 2013, <https://www.wmagazine.com/story/george-herms-emergio>.

2. Morán Morán, *George Herms and Terence Koh*, checklist, 2019.

3. Morán Morán, *sleeping in a beam of sunlight*, press release, 2017.



Sarah Lucas: Au Naturel (installation view) (2019).
Image courtesy of the artist and the Hammer
Museum, Los Angeles. Photo: Jeff McLane.

and complexity of Herms' three-dimensional collages, in which he elevates and transforms his simple materials, taking them beyond their initial function. Koh's objects tightly hinged on being adapted Hermses—banking on the use of the older artist's idiosyncratic found materials—and the one-note boats never managed to escape this provenance.

The sculpture the boats pointed to is called *honey boat* (2019), an assemblage work based around a hive box filled with buzzing bees. A boxwood tree sprung from a can strapped to the front of the box, joined by solar panels, a speaker, and a small wax effigy of a person. Apparently semen, as well as ashes from the Woolsey fire (which raged across parts of Ventura and Los Angeles counties last November), were sprinkled in somewhere too. A plastic tube led bees out of the hive through a large gash in the gallery wall and a smashed window out into the gallery's parking lot. The piece was not without poetic moments—a branch extending from the box out through the hole in the wall, just caressed the vines outside—but the work generally failed to capitalize on the potential of its loaded parts. Koh pulled together several elements that allude to some sort of transformative, ritualistic function, but an overwhelming vagueness hampered any explicit or evocative reading.

This was not the first time Koh has used bees in his work. Two years ago he built a bee chapel atop the roof of Morán Morán (then called Morán Bondaroff) for his solo show *sleeping in a beam of sunlight*.

The press release captured the deadpan mix of self-seriousness and tongue-in-cheek absurdity that often characterizes Koh's persona, specifying that for the duration of the show he would live in the gallery. "Snacks are pages from ayn rand's anthem marinated in honey and baked at 450 fahrenheit to a bitter sweet crisp," he wrote. "My toilet for the next month and half will bee [sic] a compost toilet six feet up in the air that will drop poop from the sky."³

Before the bees though, Koh was more well-known for the immaterial and pristine than the worn and tactile. He crawled around a white pillar of salt on his knees eight hours a day for a month, shot a bright floodlight across the Whitney Museum, gold-plated his excrement, took to wearing all white, and hobnobbed with celebrity art world crossovers like Lady Gaga and Marina Abramović. In 2014, he withdrew to the Catskills in a drop-out stunt that simultaneously screamed for attention. Then he returned with the bees, wax, dirt, plants, and an aesthetic that aligns well with Herms' timeworn archive. Although Koh seems to genuinely honor Herms' precedent—and Herms has given the younger artist his blessing—the show ended up highlighting the gulf, rather than the implied synergy, between them. Herms' assemblages explore the tension between original function and new meanings derived through juxtaposition, and while Koh's works were constructed from the same cache of found objects, they lacked the same sense of open-ended resonance.

Hanna Hur at Bel Ami

June 7–July 20, 2019

As a writer with a seminary background, I wanted to unquestionably support Hanna Hur's recent spiritually-inflected solo exhibition, *Signal at the Wheel, Hover at the Gate*. "Art" and "spirituality," already unwieldy words on their own, have had a complicated history—so much so that it's often easier to nod our heads along with Harry Cooper, senior curator at the National Gallery of Art, who argues that "art has replaced religion: In a secular, modern, disenfranchised world, art is as close as we can come to the divine."¹

But a quick glance around recent museum and gallery exhibitions will reveal that this viewpoint oversimplifies a much more complex relationship. Today, monks host meditation practices in museums,² artists self-identify as witches,³ and exhibitions with spiritual themes break attendance records.⁴ The belief that art replaced religion—that it was an easy switch, like a change of clothes—misses how art and spirit are blending in complicated ways *now*. I wanted to leave Bel Ami celebrating another show that could deftly navigate these two worlds, more proof that spirituality and religion continue to offer vital ways of engaging with art. Instead, I left feeling conflicted and struggled for weeks to understand why.

For Hur, her paintings function as documentation, notes from spiritual quests. Her investigations developed out



Above: George Herms, *Light Cone Rose* (2005).
Assemblage sculpture, 9.5 × 26 × 5.5 inches.
Image courtesy of the artist and Morán Morán.

Below: Terence Koh, *boats* (detail) (2019).
Assemblage materials relinquished by George
Herms, beeswax candles, and sunlight,
dimensions variable. Image courtesy
of the artist and Morán Morán.



Hanna Hur, *The Wheel* (2019). Colored pencil on silk, 48 x 36 inches. Image courtesy the artist and Bel Ami, Los Angeles. Photo: Naoki Sutter-Shudo.

of her departure from Korean-American Christianity and later work she did with Korean shamans (*mudangs*) in Seoul to navigate spiritual and ancestral realms. More than dabbling in spirituality, Hur's return to shamanism reads as postcolonial recovery. A religious practice long-banished by missionaries, shamanism's revival in South Korea has been decades in the making as the country recognized its cultural importance as a "repository of Korean culture" with rituals that have "preserved traditional costumes, music, and dance forms."⁵

This religious biography directly entered Hur's exhibition as subject matter: in *Mother ix* (2019) and *Moonbather (after Laurie)* (2018), clothed figures, evoking the costume of the *mudang*, open geometric gates and walk through metaphysical borderlands. In *The Wheel* (2019), ethereal figures congregate around central orbs on a translucent silk surface. These bulbous, Matisse-like figures reappear in *The Gate* and *The Gate iv* (both 2019), drifting through geometric patterns of soft grids and circles like spirit guides in action.

Hur's spiritual quest also influenced her geometric abstractions, works in dialogue with a long history of artists painting patterns to reach beyond the canvas.⁶ Like Hilma af Klint's spiritualist abstractions, Hur's *Through* and *Through ii* (both 2014–2018) balance whorls of organic and geometric shapes in harmony. Elsewhere, as in *Signal* (2019), delicate circular grids endlessly repeat and transfigure—meditative movements that slow down the viewer's eyes like the faintly

drawn repetitions of an Agnes Martin. All of these works felt hypnotic, even centrifugal—as if by staring at the patterns long enough, they might expand beyond the frame. There was a meditative repetition that Hur invited her viewers to experience, a kind of visual mantra to encourage a common spiritual practice: the difficult task of slowing down the ego to see beyond its limiting boundaries (what the novelist Iris Murdoch calls "unselfing").

But more than just depicting religious subject matter or translating spirituality through geometric abstraction, Hur sees these artworks *functioning* as ritual artifacts created to transform consciousness and literally limn the otherworldly. Certainly, Hur is not alone in this blending of ritual and artistic practice (see fellow L.A. artists like Carolina Caycedo, Candice Lin, Betye Saar, and Veronique D'Entremont), but the press release—a genre meant to contextualize a gallery artwork, and ultimately position it for sale—pushed this spiritual function of her work *hard*, describing Hur as opening channels to "another dimension, immaterial and unseen" somewhere "beyond the veil." In preparation for this show, the artist performed private ceremonies in the gallery space to "open a gate for spirits to enter" and co-mingle with gallery goers. Viewers were asked to not only look at contemplative paintings, but to believe in them as literal gates to other dimensions.

It's this uncritical merger of explicit spiritual claims with the actions of art-making that can feel transgressive,

especially for viewers unfamiliar with (or uninterested in) religion. According to the logic of the press release, there would be little difference between looking at the artworks and participating in hours-long *gut* rites performed by a Korean shaman—both open the same doorways "to an alternate world." So if both Hur's painting and the ritual objects of the *mudang* serve the same purpose, what is the artwork or its gallery for? Or the shaman for that matter?⁷ It's a similar dynamic that L.A. art critic Christopher Knight noticed in LACMA's didactic show on Buddhism. Troubled by how the "embodiment of a religious philosophy" obscured the materiality and aesthetic properties of certain art objects, he ultimately concludes that "an art museum cannot be a Buddhist shrine."⁸

In our current moment, art and spirituality can be in fruitful dialogue, even as they allow each other slippage between genre and context. This complex relationship works as long as both traditions remain distinct enough that neither obscures the other. When placed within a gallery, an artwork, no matter how spiritually inflected, should be freed from its author enough to function as a stand-alone aesthetic object, open for multiple interpretations. In *Signal at the Wheel, Hover at the Gate*, the preemptive spiritual claims for the artworks exaggerated the role of the gallery to religious dimensions. Dislocated from its historical function, the gallery space became ambiguous: is this a space for viewing (and purchasing) art objects or for participating in the rituals of Korean shamanism? This

1. Harry Cooper, "The Whole Truth," *Artforum*, May 2018.

2. Sophia Kamps, "Buddhist monks to lead meditation at New York's Museum of Modern Art," *Lion's Roar*, July 10, 2018, <https://www.lionsroar.com/buddhist-monk-to-lead-meditation-at-the-museum-of-modern-art/>.

3. Amanda Gates Garcia, "The Rise of the L.A. Art Witch," *Carla* Issue 6.



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Sebastian Hernandez, *Pistil* (performance view)
(2019). Image courtesy of the artist and NAVEL.
Photo: Jonas Wendelin.

ambiguity of the *purpose* of the show worked against the viewer's ability to see Hur's work as aesthetic pieces in their own right. Without this pretext, Hur's graceful geometric works would have done plenty to slow the breath and the eyes—offering if not a doorway into another world, at least a clearer vision of our own.

Sebastian Hernandez at NAVEL May 16, 2019

Midway through an hour long performance, Sebastian Hernandez stood, wearing only a thong and heels, on a glass tabletop being held up by three practically nude performers in tightly coiled fetal positions. With a microphone in hand, Hernandez declared himself a game-changer within the context of Los Angeles art history. The performance was commissioned by NAVEL, and was presented as part of *No Cruising*—a multi-day event organized by Chris Tyler. Titled *Pistil*, it was performed by the artist alongside three additional performers (Nareg Nikolay Karamyan, Miguel Reyna, and Chen Di Xuan). This declarative moment by Hernandez would later be encapsulated on Instagram as emblematic of their performance: it presented the paradoxical drives at work in this highly sexualized display of trans femme brown bodies. Exposing a split desire to be intellectually historicized and sexually objectified, Hernandez measured their cultural value against a backdrop of euphoric exhibitionism.

Within the confines of one's safe community, claiming space and historical agency is a cathartic exercise, particularly in a political climate dominated by xenophobia and sexual repression. Hernandez's performance began inside NAVEL's glass-enclosed backroom, where the performers

invoked voyeurism as a theatrical ploy by openly indulging in onlookers' stares while strutting around wearing pore-cleaning face masks, crop tops, and lowriders. When the main lights switched on and the dark synth music started, the performers paraded out, blowing up balloons, tossing them into the crowd, and popping them with their stilettos. For almost 20 minutes, they indulged in a techno-infused rave of four, voguing and pulsating their bodies against the floor and each other, while progressively stripping down to only their thongs. In any other context, this sensual live performance would have been perceived as a striptease. However, at NAVEL, an institution which fosters experimental collaboration and diverse viewpoints, Hernandez's performance felt more like a healing ritual. The queer-centric crowd shouted and snapped in approval at this trans femme celebration.

As the music dissipated, Hernandez, Karamyan, Reyna, and Chen grabbed a circular glass tabletop which they carried around, at one point lifting it above their heads like Greek caryatids. Hernandez's three sweaty muses then crouched to the floor, positioned themselves head to groin and laid the heavy glass table top upon their intertwined bodies for Hernandez to step atop and read from a pre-scripted four-minute monologue.

"Assigned male at birth. Here I am making a highly compromised work of art. Still, in this safe space called an art institution. Still, too uncomfortable to do something like this

4. Annie Armstrong, "Guggenheim's Hilma af Klint Survey Is Most Popular Show in Its History," *ARTnews*, April 18, 2019, <http://www.artnews.com/2019/04/18/guggenheims-hilma-af-klint-survey-is-most-popular-show-in-its-history/>.

5. Choe Sang-Hun, "Shamanism Enjoys Revival in Techno-Savvy South Korea," *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/07/world/asia/07korea.html>.

6. See LACMA's "The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985" exhibition for a thorough overview.

7. For more on how images operate in religious contexts see David Morgan's *Images at Work: The Material Culture of Enchantment*.

8. Christopher Knight, "Overstating the Religious?" *Los Angeles Times*, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2003-oct-06-et-knight6-story.html>.

out in public... What is in my immediate future? Being the first indigenous queer trans femme, queer indigenous trans-woman to make Los Angeles art history.”

Physically standing upon the shoulders of others to declare one’s cultural value in a society that consistently diminishes, ignores, or misidentifies one’s existence is powerful. Predetermining one’s impact solely on the basis of identity, however, limits the scope of interpretation. The critical intent seemed inverted as Hernandez literalized in language what we had just witnessed energetically.

The performance was framed in the press release as being in response to the Cooper’s Donuts riot of 1959. Believed to be one of the first gay uprisings in the United States, a small riot in downtown Los Angeles ensued when a group of drag queens, transgender women, gay, and lesbian customers threw donuts, trash, and coffee at police officers as they attempted to arrest LGBTQ customers for presenting as a gender other than the one represented on their government IDs. Sixty years later, laws and cultural perceptions have dramatically shifted, and yet societal discrimination, familial rejection, and police harassment remain, particularly for trans and queer people of color. Seen in this light, the promenading of the four queer performers felt revelatory, as if they were impersonating the defiant attitude demonstrated by the Cooper’s Donuts customers decades ago.

While holding energetic space for historical trauma through one’s own embodied

experience is a critical form of resistance, Hernandez’s performance rode a fine line between overindulgent sexual display and ritualistic group care. For the final act, the performance accelerated into sexual overdrive as the performers spread gelatinous material over one another while kissing, moaning, and sliding across each other’s bodies. Under a flashing green strobe light, Hernandez strapped on a half-cut papaya between their legs while the others vigorously licked, sucked, and munched on it. By this point, my experience as a viewer toggled between easy arousal and skeptical amusement, making it difficult to integrate the larger historical connection, or mythical proclamations of the artist. As I considered Hernandez’s earlier announcement in which they predetermined their cultural impact on art in Los Angeles, I was left feeling that the sensuality of the acts being played out were undermined by an anxiety to label, define, and contextualize. In the act of myth-making, artists risk overexposing their ambition, restricting the interpretation of their work and alienating their audience. Hernandez’s unfettered, choreographed group play was evidence enough of the defiant attitude they pose as an artist.

(L.A. in N.Y.) Alex Israel at Greene Naftali April 30–June 15, 2019

Seven years ago, Alex Israel recorded *As it Lays*, a series of interviews with “iconic and influential” Angelenos in his

studio at the Pacific Design Center in West Hollywood.¹ Sitting upright and still, any expression in his eyes hidden behind his Freeway sunglasses (his own brand), he asks random and unconnected questions to his celebrity subjects—to Marilyn Manson, “Did you have a childhood comfort object?”; to Jamie Lee Curtis, “Do you scrapbook?”; and to Christina Ricci, “What did you eat for breakfast this morning?” Israel repeatedly fails to respond or react to any of their answers, regardless of how convivial they are. These eight- to twelve-minute skits are as hilarious as they are baffling. Israel’s banal interview style is a Trojan horse for an interrogation of these lauded individuals. Seeing how a celebrity deals with his antics is far more revealing than the answers they provide. In some ways, these videos unmask Hollywood’s sleaze—how someone with power and money can have access to anyone—and here Israel inserts himself into this scheme. The interviewees generally prove kind and interesting, and Israel, who produced the videos a few years after graduating with his MFA from USC, becomes the center of attention. A celebrity in waiting.

Recently, *As it Lays* came back. Israel is older, has better hair, a new Giorgio Armani suit, and if it’s possible, an even *more* wooden approach to interviewing. The upgraded set resembles a Grecian-style living room with an oil-painted *trompe l’oeil* background; replacing the original faded, faux Breuer chairs are two regency style tub chairs purportedly snagged from a yard sale at Oprah Winfrey’s. The intro music is a classy,

1. Reena Spaulings Fine Art, *Alex Israel, As it Lays*, press release, 2012, <<http://www.reenaspaulings.com/images3/ISRAEL.PR.pdf>>.

all-strings affair, rather than the synthy, saxophone-led ditty from Israel's last installment, and the logo for the film has rebranded from a blocky, pop-art inspired silhouette of Israel to an elegant line drawing reminiscent of Alfred Hitchcock's brand from the 1950s.

Even the gallery got pimped. In 2012, esoteric Reena Spaulings Fine Art in the Lower East Side hosted the show; in 2019, it was swanky Greene Naftali in Chelsea.² Walking down their alley off 26th Street, you could hear the audio from a new set of interviews being pumped into the industrial space. Alicia Silverstone mused on the gluttony of carnivals, Corey Feldman deliberated over his favorite Kardashian, and Paris Hilton reflected on loneliness and aging. You could press your nose up against the gallery window to gaze at the interviews of these passé starlets or enter the gallery via a giant profile of Israel cut out of the wall.

Inside, in addition to the empty *As it Lays 2* set were five large oil paintings from Israel's *Self-Portrait* series that hung around the room. Each an enlarged contour of his same profile, they depicted assorted scenes loosely representative of Israel's life. The exhibition took its title from Joan Didion's *Play It As It Lays*, and these visages recalled the book's protagonist, Maria, who describes her mind as a blank tape that records her encounters and experiences. Israel's self-portraits reveal that his mind is somewhat vacuous, filled with scantily-clad females (photographed at a music festival in *Self-Portrait [Coachella]*, 2019),

automobiles (Israel stares back in his car's mirror in *Self-Portrait [Rear-view Mirror]*, 2018) and celebrity worship (a collection of signed framed photographs comprised *Self-Portrait [Autographs]*, 2019).

Concealed in a back room were a group of works from Israel's continued practice of utilizing props from well-known films. Five framed reproductions of the golden tickets from *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory* hung next to a mimicry of the idol from *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. All were glimmering objects that, in their respective movies, signified desire and reward. Israel's use of these objects pointed flimsily to the tired notions of the artifice of Hollywood, or narratives around originality, authorship, and chance.

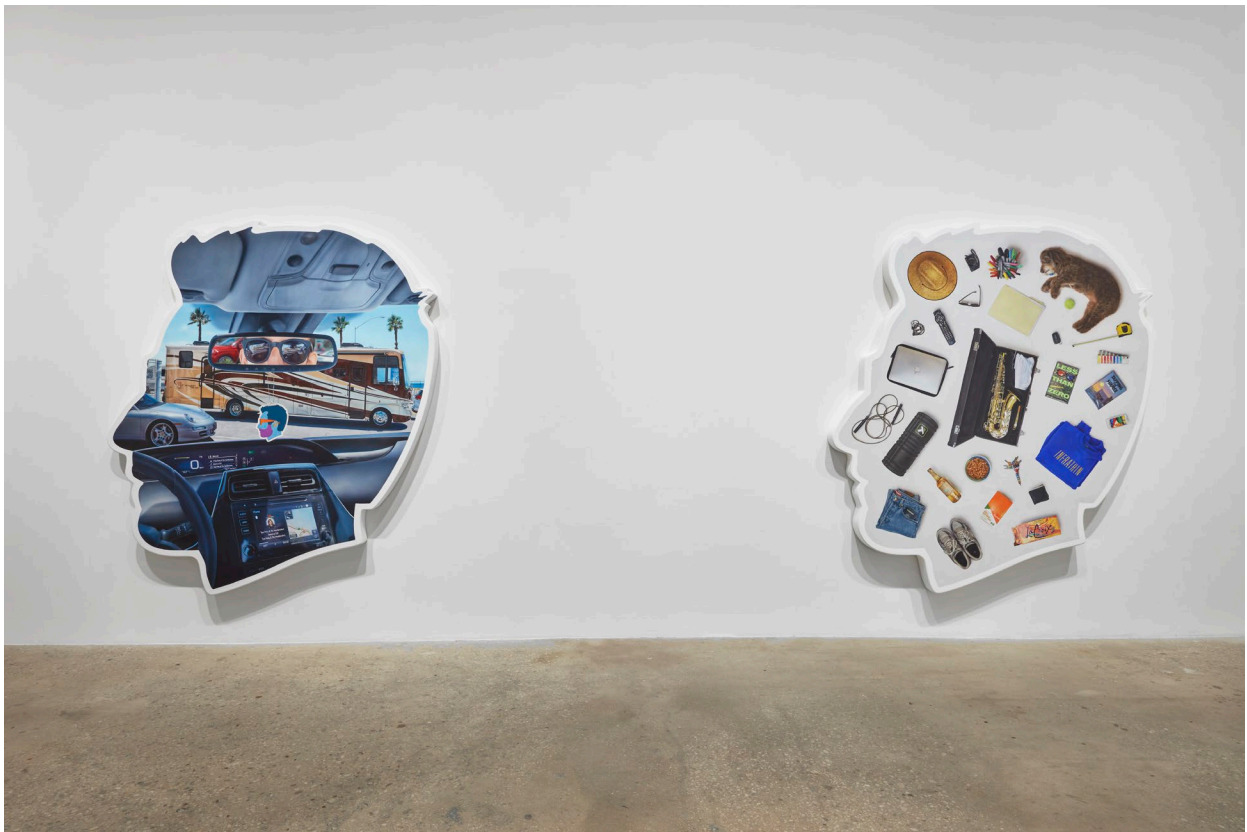
It is not by chance, however, that Israel decided to premiere both seasons of *As it Lays* in New York City. An emissary from the West Coast, he delights in perpetuating the myth and sheen of the City of Angels to its more cynical East Coast counterpart. His work enforces the stereotypes of the city by using the strategies and aesthetics reserved for commerce and Hollywood. In doing so, it is evident how little consequence both have, and so it's difficult to read Israel's work as anything other than trivial. Yet, as a Brit, and a self-confessed Americanophile, I find myself magnetized to it—the dream of Los Angeles that he propels in his work is the same one that I grew up believing in. If the first season of *As it Lays* taught us about celebrity and Israel's privileged status, this season only seemed to repeat that narrative. In movie parlance

a sequel generally represents some success for the first film, and it is anticipated that the second will develop ideas further (and act as a well-proven cash cow). What we learned from another season of *As it Lays*: with money and power comes more money and more power.

2. Running concurrently to *As it Lays*, Israel presented *So/o*, an exhibition at Reena Spaulings Fine Art, featuring a hologram of the artist playing a saxophone.



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Above: Alex Israel, *As It Lays 2*
(production still with Paris Hilton and Alex Israel)
(2019). Talk show set and video installation,
33 episodes, total running time: 5 hours, 47 minutes.
Image courtesy of the artist and Greene Naftali,
New York. Photo: Sarah Bradham.

Below: Alex Israel, *As It Lays 2* (installation view)
(2019). Image courtesy of the artist and Greene
Naftali, New York. Photo: Tom Powell.

Photo Essay

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Portrait artists

Bari Ziperstein is a Los Angeles-based artist who received her MFA from CalArts, Valencia in 2004. Her studio-based sculptures and experimental public art have been featured in numerous exhibitions. She is the creator of BZippy & Co., whose intimately- and architecturally-scaled vases, vessels, and lamps are highly regarded among interior designers, private collectors, and the trade press.

Justen LeRoy is a curator and artist focusing on bringing art out of the white cube and into the streets of his native Los Angeles, where he's worked to build community initiatives at The Underground Museum and now at his family-run barbershop in South Central, Touched By An Angel.

Ragen Moss has had solo exhibitions at Ramiken Crucible (N.Y.), Redling (L.A.), and LA><ART (L.A.), and will hold a forthcoming solo exhibition at Bridget Donahue (N.Y.) in November 2019. Moss is a participant in the 2019 *Whitney Biennial* (N.Y.) and has been included in group shows internationally. Her work has been published in *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and more. Moss holds an MFA from UCLA, a JD from the UCLA School of Law, and a BA in Art History from Columbia University.

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Kate Spencer Stewart

J. Parker Valentine

carla

Corrections

Review

Sebastian Hernandez
at NAVEL

1. An earlier version of this review incorrectly identified the organizer of *No Cruising*. It was organized by Chris Tyler.

Last updated: October 1, 2019